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**Chapter 8. Imagery, movement and listeners' construction of meaning in**

**North Indian classical music**

**Laura Leante**

Reception is an important aspect of music performance: musicians and listeners attend to, evaluate and make sense of the sounds that they make and hear. The ‘receivers’ of music *par excellence*, however, the ‘listeners’ as commonly understood – those who are not directly involved in the physical production of musical sound – are often overlooked by artists and scholars alike. Nonetheless, whether they participate in an event or listen to a recording, these people too contribute to making music meaningful. In this chapter I will focus on the role of these listeners and discuss aspects of reception in the North Indian (Hindustani) classical tradition. In particular, I will show how ethnographic enquiries among listeners can help shed light on the processes of meaning construction in music – especially the relationship between linguistically articulated and embodied experiences of music – and complement the more common investigation of musicians’ perspectives.

North Indian classical music is based on a system of modes known as ragas. These ragas are defined in terms of both their musical features (for example pivotal pitches or distinctive phrases) and extra-musical traits with which they are associated, such as moods, prescribed times of performance, images, characters or contingent effects they are believed to cause. These elements are a fundamental part of the complex corpus of knowledge of the Hindustani classical tradition, and artists, in everyday discourse about music and its practice, talk about ragas with reference to these extra-musical characteristics, as well as technical musical features.

During a formal performance, musicians usually introduce a raga just by its name, leaving the more knowledgeable listeners to fully appreciate its associations. This expert audience, usually made up of connoisseurs, amateur musicians and – ideally – a small number of professional artists, is the public which many performers particularly cherish and value. Other music lovers and lay audiences are also believed to be able to enjoy the music and the feelings it conveys, albeit with less sophisticated understanding: however, their views are not

usually taken into account, since there is a shared assumption – at least amongst musicians – that one’s appreciation of music can only be ‘real’ and valuable if it matches the discourse of artists and the more erudite commentators.

Over the last century or so North Indian classical music performance has ceased to be the almost exclusive (and mostly private) prerogative of a few elite patrons in the royal courts, and has become instead the (predominantly public) domain of a fast-growing middle class. Although the courtly environment still remains the romantic ideal reference in the discourse of many artists, nowadays it is largely amongst the urban middle classes that both performers and lovers of this music can be found. Concerts are spread throughout the year (although they intensify during festival seasons in the winter) and take place in a number of contexts and places, which range from public performances in large halls or marquees to smaller events hosted in private homes. A large body of published recordings, radio and television broadcasts, and the internet represent other readily accessible sources of music, playing a prominent role in the musical life of many individuals.

Hindustani classical music tends to be described – by both musicians and listeners – as an old and complex tradition, and is believed to arouse profound emotions, which can be associated with spirituality (in the sense of transcendent aesthetical appreciation) and/or religious feelings. In this chapter I will investigate how these ideas map onto the experience of listening to a specific raga. In particular I will discuss how the verbal articulation of such experience relates to the possibility for audiences to embody sound as patterns of movement, and at the same time is informed by common discursive tropes, local cultures and practices. To this end, I will present the outcome of a study based on ethnographic work carried out among Bengali concert-goers and classical music lovers.

## Background

Literature on the reception of music is mostly confined to studies of Western music and of Western audiences: work on non-Western repertoires or on processes of cross-cultural reception is extremely scarce. Notable exceptions relating to Indian music are the studies carried out by Charles and Angeliki Keil (1966) and B. C. Deva and K. G. Virmani (1968 and 1976), and more recently those of Andrew Gregory and Nicholas Varney (1996), Laura-Lee Balkwill and William Thompson (1999), Martin Clayton (2005), and Parag Chordia and Alex Rae (2008).

Keil and Keil's 1966 and Deva and Virmani's 1968 articles are reports on the two parts of a collaborative study on the cross-cultural reception of music carried out respectively with American and Indian audiences. The former presented a group of listeners with a number of music examples – including four Hindustani ragas – and asked them to assign scores to each extract according to adjective rating scales, subsequently carrying out statistical analysis of the responses. Deva and Virmani (1968) report on a closely related experiment carried out among South Asians and limited to the Hindustani music examples. Gregory and Varney (1996) too used lists of adjectives and statistical tools in their study of responses by British and British Asian listeners. Similarly, Balkwill and Thompson (1999) and Chordia and Rae (2008) analysed ratings of emotions elicited by a number of ragas amongst groups of listeners from different cultural backgrounds; the latter combined their quantitative study with the investigation of responses provided spontaneously by listeners. Free responses were the focus for Clayton (2005), who commented on the range of associations – on a cross-cultural basis – to a single raga, Shree, which I also analyse in this chapter and to which I will return in the following pages.

What these approaches share with mine is the implicit or explicit acknowledgement that the articulation of the experience of music is characterised to a high extent by 'synaesthesia,' by

which I mean the description of one kind of sense-impression through reference to another sense-impression (Alan Merriam's 'intersense transfer').<sup>1</sup> This capacity is in turn related to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's recognition of metaphor as the grounding of the way we process our experience of the world (2003: 3): rather than being simply a rhetorical device, metaphor is 'based on cross-domain correlations in our experience, which give rise to the perceived similarities between the two domains within the metaphor.' (2003: 245).

Metaphors can derive from the embodiment of sensorial experience, as 'the core of our conceptual system is directly grounded in perception, body movement, and experience of a physical and social character' (Lakoff 1987: xiv). As I illustrated elsewhere (Fatone et al. 2011: 207-211), an auditory stimulus can be perceived at the bodily level as a pattern of movement; this same movement encoded in the music and then embodied by a listener can in turn elicit an image conveying analogous kinetic qualities.

What the present research adds to previous studies on the reception of North Indian classical music is the demonstration that the cross-sensorial nature of the experience of music implicit in its synaesthetic articulation is rooted in a process of embodiment which acts as *trait d'union* between metaphor and sound. This process of embodiment informs the way people talk about their experience of music and describe the images and feelings to which it gives rise.

Semiotician Philip Tagg has addressed metaphor and cross-sensoriality in his theorization of 'kinetic anaphones' (sound analogues of movement) and embodiment of patterns of movement through what he calls 'gestural interconversion', discussing the possibility that qualities arising from connotations of a piece of music can be mediated through gesture.<sup>2</sup> Tagg's work suggests that through extensive enquiries among both musicians and listeners it is possible to identify such processes of embodied mediation and analyse them in the light of the imagery and emotions people associate with music.

North Indian classical music, thanks to its rich imagery and explicitly articulated extra-musical associations is an ideal object for this kind of investigation. I drew on Tagg's methodology in a previous discussion of the ways in which a number of Hindustani classical performers employ gesture alongside imagery in order to describe the characteristics of a raga. In that research I suggested that both the gesture and the imagery implicated in the embodiment of sound as patterns of movement contribute to the process of signification of music and shape the experience that performers have of a raga performance (Leante 2009).<sup>3</sup> This chapter complements that research and discusses the potential application of such a method to the study of the reception of Hindustani classical music among North Indian audiences; it also aims to open a window on listeners' "interpretive moves"<sup>4</sup> and offers a portrayal of the so often unvoiced audiences of North India whose views are not generally held to be worthy of consideration. In so doing it draws a more realistic picture of Hindustani classical music reception which can add to and enrich the dominant discourse on music by Indian musicians and scholarship.

### **Working with audiences**

What follows is largely based on fieldwork conducted in the state of West Bengal with the EMMP project team. One of the main goals of the research was to carry out group interviews with North Indian classical music listeners in order to analyse their responses to a selection of pre-recorded music excerpts. The data collection took place between January 2007 and January 2008 in five different locations in West Bengal, including Kolkata and a number of industrial and rural towns (namely Durgapur, Purulia, Raniganj and Seuri):<sup>5</sup> the intention was to collect a sample of responses which reflected both the audiences of the large city where the live classical music scene is most active, and of smaller locations where concerts are less frequent.

Throughout most of the time in the field, the team was joined by a Bengali musician who acted as a research associate, providing linguistic support as well as further insight into local practices and cultures;<sup>6</sup> together with him, a network of local contacts helped us to coordinate the work in the different locations and facilitated our interaction with groups of listeners.

The interviews involved the participation of concert-goers and music lovers of different ages, who were recruited through personal acquaintances and/or among people who attended performances which we had organised and recorded as part of the same project. The overall research included eleven sessions and involved more than a hundred informants, of whom only a couple were professional musicians.<sup>7</sup>

The meetings were arranged in small groups (the average size being around ten people) and were carried out in both English and Bengali, in order to allow participants to fully understand the discussion and express themselves without language constraints. Sessions always started with an introductory conversation, whose main purpose was to allow us to introduce our research project and give participants time to relax. During this first part of the meeting, we presented the purpose of our work as an enquiry into what people think and feel when listening to music and explained that we would soon play them a piece of music which would then be discussed together; we also specified that this kind of ‘listening experiment’, as we called it, had no ‘right or wrong’ answers, and didn’t require technical knowledge of music – a clarification that was usually enough to reassure those who were at first intimidated. (Some initial embarrassment confirmed that non-connoisseurs are not usually expected to give a personal opinion on what the experience of music means to them.) On the contrary, we stressed how the focus was on each individual’s personal experience of music and we encouraged participants to express themselves freely. Our introduction deliberately avoided revealing that analysis of movement and embodiment was amongst the objects of our



study, in order not to induce excessive self consciousness in the participants or influence their behaviour or their responses during the session.

The second and more extended part of the meeting consisted of playing an audio excerpt of a raga. The alap was used, since it is in this introductory, unmetred part of the performance that the identity and the mood of the raga are presented and established. Moreover, as the alap does not include pre-composed melodies or songs, our analysis would not need to take into account the semantic associations which the presence of a verbal text (in a vocal track) or its recollection (for example in the case of an instrumental rendition of a song) could have induced. The length of the excerpts we employed was discussed with listeners during a first pilot session. On that occasion participants had commented on an audio example lasting less than 3 minutes and encouraged us to use longer tracks; therefore, whenever possible (the length of an alap can depend on a number of factors), we employed excerpts lasting around 5 minutes.

Before playing the music we distributed blank sheets of paper on which we asked participants to indicate their name (if wishing to be acknowledged in research outputs), age, gender, and (if applicable) any form of musical training they had received. We deliberately did not use any checklist, which we feared might have a cultural bias: in this my approach differs from that of the Keils, Deva and Virmani,<sup>8</sup> Gregory and Varney, and Balkwill and Thompson as much as it resembles Tagg's methodology. In fact we invited people to write notes (in the language they felt most comfortable with, whether English, Bengali or, in a few cases, Hindi)<sup>9</sup> on any thought, image or emotion occurring to them. In order to provide further clarification, we suggested that they might think – for instance – of where and how they would imagine themselves listening to that sound. The decision to allow such freedom was matched by the intention to carry out a predominantly qualitative study, as we could not control the range of responses and therefore make any detailed statistical analysis of the data

collected. The analysis discussed in the following pages therefore relies on the identification of recurrent themes emerging from the unconstrained feedback provided by participants. The frequency of occurrence of certain themes and images is often expressed in percentages: in interpreting such quantifications the spontaneous nature of the feedback should be borne in mind.<sup>10</sup> The variable nature and length of responses, together with the additional constraints deriving from the use of multiple languages, limits the possibilities for in depth statistical study; however, I suggest that this method can contribute to a more realistic and culturally sensitive understanding of the process of music reception.

We decided in most instances not to disclose the details of the recording beforehand in order not to directly influence listeners' responses either with previous knowledge of extra-musical characteristics linked to a particular raga or by triggering semantic associations which could be related to the name of the artist or the music. In these cases we specified that we were not expecting interviewees to guess or identify the raga that was being played. However, we asked them to let us know if they thought they had recognized the music: this would allow us to check whether such recognition might have affected their responses.

We always played the excerpt at least twice and allowed for extra time after each listening period, in order to let people take notes both while the music was being played and afterwards. The third part of the session consisted of an informal discussion of the excerpt, which enabled us to clarify any ambiguity which could have emerged from the participants' written notes. Papers were collected at the end of the meeting and subsequently transcribed and – where necessary – translated into English for analysis. Audio recordings were made of all sessions; although we observed the gesture and physical movement of participants during their discussion, we decided not to make video recordings which we thought might inhibit them.

If time allowed, we repeated the listening exercise with a second piece of music, following exactly the same procedure described above. Excerpts were played in different orders during different sessions, so that we could check whether this made any difference to the responses.<sup>11</sup> Since the procedure was very time-consuming, we never managed to work with more than two music excerpts per meeting.

The analysis below discusses responses to two ragas, Shree and Jhinjhoti. Through these two contrasting case studies I hope to demonstrate how the verbal articulation of the experience of listening to music is grounded in the embodiment of sound, and at the same time informed by the general discourse on Hindustani classical tradition as well as local culture.

### Listening to Shree

Shree is an evening raga based on a scale in which the second (Re) and sixth (Dha) degrees are flat and the fourth degree (Ma) is sharp (Figure 8.1). The most prominent degrees (*vadis*) are the flat second (Re)<sup>12</sup> and fifth (Pa); one of the raga's most distinctive features is an ascending straight slide between these two degrees, from Re to Pa.

[Figure 8.1 here]

This raga is also the object of a recent article in which I presented an analysis of interviews with Hindustani classical performers, and in which I suggested that the study of the embodiment of sound as patterns of movement can contribute to understanding how particular images and emotions are associated with ragas. In particular, I discussed how some of the images and ideas associated with Shree are widely shared by musicians. These include the sunset (explicitly linked to the time of performance of the raga), and the seriousness of its mood, often expressed through the depiction of a strong, confident character of authority or high status, such as a king, a saint, or a god. (The latter can be related to the word “Shree”,

widely used as an honorific prefix.) Other images and meanings are individually constructed by the musicians; nevertheless in most cases these associations can be ascribed to a limited number of themes, including those of ‘being in a high location’, ‘devotion and surrender’, ‘reaching out for something’ or ‘temporary separation’. There is no clear divide between these groups of associations; in fact, there seems to be a web of semantic possibilities from which each individual musician draws in order to construct his or her own picture of the raga. However, my suggestion is that what these images have in common is a specific kinetic quality, since they can be interpreted as resulting from the embodiment of a straight ascending movement: it is not coincidental, I argue, that many of the musicians made upward gestures when describing such images; even more interestingly, they often employed the same gesture to accompany the demonstration of Shree’s characteristic Re-Pa slide (cf. Clayton 2005). This interval can thus be embodied and projected either through a gesture moving away from the body, depicting the act of reaching out for something (hence the ‘temporary separation’) or with an arm movement closer to the chest, expressing a more assertive attitude (conveying a sense of strength and confidence) (Leante 2009).

I carried out interviews with listeners in order to complement the work conducted with musicians. In particular, questions which I intended to address included: are listeners’ responses consistent with those provided by the musicians, and if not how do they differ? Is it possible to identify among listeners’ responses processes of embodiment of sound analogous to those that emerged from interviews with the performers? What difference does it make to listeners’ perceptions if they are aware of the name of a raga? (With this last question in mind, I decided to conduct two sets of interviews: one in which the name of the raga was not disclosed, and one in which it was revealed before the listening.)

The audio excerpt employed for this study of the reception of Shree raga is taken from the beginning of an alap performed by *khyal* singer Veena Sahasrabuddhe lasting approximately

5'20''.<sup>13</sup> In this extract, the singer – accompanied by a harmonium audible in the background over the drone of the tanpura – explores the melodic material of the raga in the lower and middle octaves. The flat second degree (Re) is established immediately; the audio excerpt ends after the presentation and establishment of the Re-Pa upward slide (Figure 8.2) and fades out after a sustained fifth degree (Pa). It is worth noting here that Veena Sahasrabudhe herself has commented on Shree raga on different occasions: she depicted the raga as a senior, confident figure and described its devotional character.<sup>14</sup>

[Figure 8.2 here]

[INSERT OWM SPEAKER ICON HERE]

*Part I: Raga name undisclosed*

The first part of my analysis is based on seventy-five responses provided by seventy-three participants who had not been told the name of the raga, most of whom did not recognise Shree.<sup>15</sup> (A couple of people, probably misled by the presence of the flat second and sixth degrees, guessed it might be either Bhairav or Mishra Bhairavi; two other participants thought it was Puriya Dhanashree, a raga based on the same scale as Shree, but with different melodic characteristics. Although Shree is a famous raga, it is a difficult one and consequently it is not usually learnt by young students or amateur musicians).

Many responses echo the general discourse about classical music. This tradition is described as a powerful means to convey deep emotions, and to look inside one's own heart. Although musical experience is regarded as 'difficult to express in words' (Sushil Kumar Sanyal – Kolkata, 11 February 2007), it is also believed to bring soothing feelings and relief from life's struggles.<sup>16</sup> Many of these ideas are summarised in the words by Chhandam Deb, a teacher of English in a secondary school in the district of Purulia:

I felt I ought to have learned music technically. Then I could have expressed my pain, tears, anguish more movingly, and more aesthetically. Had I been a musician, I could have had some solace away from my hard-working schedule during the day. When I heard the music, it seemed that the tune had been ringing since the gloomy evening against the deep-red, darkening sky. But with the progress of the tune, the gloom gradually began to fade away – and I found myself calmer, finding more meaning in life. (Chhandam Deb – Purulia, 22 February 2007)

Chhandam Deb's words describe the red sky, a recurring image since more than 60% of participants spontaneously associated the music with that 'time when the day and the night join together' (Anindita Nandan – Seuri, 28 April 2007), i.e. dusk or dawn:

At evening or at dawn birds are returning to their nests. If I were a bird, I could glide smoothly in the sky with the flowing of the river ... Sitting beside a river, I vision in mind that a boat is moving on the river smoothly. (Saikat Chatterjee – Raniganj, 15 February 2007)

However, the picture of the morning is the most frequently occurring image among interviewees,<sup>17</sup> the rising sun being a common detail.

I am seated on the sea beach ... It seems a big red sphere is coming out of the ocean ... Slowly the morning light is coming out. (Sikha Goshwami Das – Seuri, 28 April 2007)

The proportion of participants who mentioned darkness was relatively small (approximately 13%); I will come back to this detail later. First I would like to stress that several listeners associated the music with a wide open space, for instance the ocean or a river (the latter being

a sight particularly familiar to the people we met in inland Bengal). This was often accompanied by the description of a high location (25% of participants mentioned one and/or the other):

A boat is going for infinity with the red sunlight of morning ... High mountains are looking at the sad sky. (Shilpi Chanda, translated from Bengali – Raniganj, 15 February 2007)

It is already evident from the comments above that nature features prominently in the images provided by participants. Nature seems to be conceived by listeners as a quiet, ‘purer’ dimension, a refuge from everyday’s struggles;<sup>18</sup> rivers and mountains are also strongly associated in Indian culture with religious beliefs and practices (such as pilgrimages) and although participants did not explicitly discuss such connotations, they need to be borne in mind.

The excerpt of Shree raga was also associated with devotional and religious feelings by almost 15% of informants, who often provided images of someone praying:

The atmosphere is quiet and speechless ... The preparation of the evening prayer is going on in the nearest temple. (Mahuya Ganguly – Seuri, 28 April 2007)

I do feel myself standing on the ghats, the river Ganga flowing beside me. The sadhus performing their first rituals of the day. (Dr Joydeep Banerjee – Durgapur, 18 February 2007)

The mood of the raga is generally described as sombre, thoughtful, and expressing feelings of melancholy, sadness and loneliness. These emotions are often accompanied by a sense of or an image conveying separation, or reaching out for someone or something:

The 'Rag' depicts the mood of a lady whose child has not come back from school. As returning time is already passed by, mother starts weeping and enquiring of her child whoever is passing by (Usha Ranjan Podda – Kolkata, 11 February 2007)

A mother is waiting for her child ... I feel it is evening and I am away from my mother who is in the village. I am missing my mother so much that's why I want to reach her (Shubhra Chandra – Raniganj, 15 February 2007)

Darkness everywhere, surrounding me. Seems there is some hint of light, but I will never be able to reach there. (Ellora Dutta – Durgapur, 18 February 2007)

In one particular instance, a woman from Durgapur explained how for her the object to reach was the music itself:

I am walking towards a light to catch the source of music. There is a single track from myself to that source of light or music. I am walking towards it, but never reaching it. It seems lot of patience, endurance & perseverance are needed to reach there. (Baisakhi Chakraborty, partly translated from Bengali – Durgapur, 18 February 2007)

Most interestingly, during our conversation Baisakhi Chakraborty repeatedly supported the images she described with the performance of an upward straight gesture of the arm, as in the act of reaching out. The same gesture was either made or hinted at by other listeners too.<sup>19</sup> This was consistent with what I had noticed in my previous enquiries among musicians, who often associated such a gesture with the upward Re-Pa slide (Leante 2009). I suggest that



there is a certain quality of the music (Shree's distinctive Re-Pa phrase) which could have been embodied by Baisakhi and then expressed through the movement of her arm; this gesture also helped her to convey the image which she articulated verbally. This seems to confirm that – as I previously discussed (Leante 2009) – both imagery and gesture stem from the same process of embodiment of sound, and the two participate in a single process of signification. This process contributes to making the experience of music meaningful.

In the excerpt employed in our sessions, the establishment of the Re-Pa interval corresponds to a shift of focus from the lower to the middle octave of the music (Figure 8.2, marked ✱, which could have further reinforced the sense of upward motion conveyed by the music.<sup>20</sup> However, I believe the sense of yearning, suspension, and non-fulfilment mentioned by some can be explained by the Re-Pa slide specific to Shree rather than by a general sense of ascent.

Similarly, I suggest that other images and feelings elicited by the music can be better understood if considered as conveying related kinetic qualities. For example, the prominence of the association of the music with sunrise rather than sunset, although not consistent with the time the raga is supposed to be performed and therefore with the images and feelings that musicians would claim it expresses, can be seen as the projection of a straight ascending movement. This same ascent can elicit a sense of either seeing or being in a high location (on a mountain, for example). Finally, yearning for something or looking up at someone can be understood as related to gestures of offering and devotion to a saint or a god – who, in turn, are figures with a 'high' status. Interestingly, though, and contrarily to what emerged from the interviews carried out with performers, none of the listeners mentioned other figures of authority, such as princes, kings, or warriors, or the feeling of strength and confidence with which Shree raga is commonly associated by musicians (Leante 2009). I will return to this point below.

In addition many responses were rich in details depicting various ‘local’ realities, from the description of the intense red evening sky, to that of wide quiet rivers or of the girls walking to a temple<sup>21</sup> – all images very familiar to those acquainted with Bengal.

Similarly, the love of poetry, a commonplace in Bengalis’ descriptions of themselves which recurred in our conversations, was reflected in participants’ feedback, which was sometimes expressed in verses or made reference, explicitly or implicitly, to well known poems. Special mention should be made of Rabindranath Tagore, whose influence on modern Bengali culture can hardly be overestimated and whose works cropped up repeatedly during our meetings with listeners. One of these instances was that of a man from Seuri, Sri Dipankar Roy:

In the language of Tagore, ‘You are standing on the opposite side of  
my song. My melodies are getting the feet [*sic*], but I do not get you’.

(Sri Dipankar Roy – Seuri, 28 April 2007)

The poem Mr Roy refers to is taken from Tagore’s *Gitanjali* (‘Offering of songs’) collection, and – strikingly – summarises several of the images which were discussed above. These include the acknowledgement of the music as a ‘higher’ means of expression, its association with devotion (indicated in the poem by the overall address to the Lord as well as through the more specific image of touching his feet), the feeling of being in a high location, and the view of a wide open space:

When thou commandest me to sing it seems that my heart would break with  
pride; and I look to thy face, and tears come to my eyes.

All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts into one sweet harmony – and my  
adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across the sea.

I know thou takest pleasure in my singing. I know that only as a singer I come  
before thy presence.

I touch by the edge of the far-spreading wing of my song thy feet which I could  
never aspire to reach.

Drunk with the joy of singing I forget myself and call thee friend who art my  
lord.

(Rabindranath Tagore, 1928 – English version by W. B. Yeats)

This example clearly illustrates how images elicited by music can be linked to local or regional culture, literature, shared beliefs and associations about the musical genres, as well as to processes of embodiment of sound. These images map onto each other in a complex web of signifiers, and it is not possible to neatly distinguish between linguistically articulated and embodied experiences of music.

To recapitulate, many of the responses elicited by the audio excerpt of a vocal *khyal* performance of Shree raga played to a group of Bengali listeners echo the general discourse about Hindustani classical music. At the same time several images seem to be more directly related to this specific raga: these are mostly images and feelings deriving from the embodiment of an ascending pattern of movement of the music, including *Shree*'s distinctive Re-Pa slide. This suggests that such a process of embodiment – which can be expressed physically through an upward moving gesture – contributes to making the experience of *Shree* raga meaningful for musicians and listeners alike. Moreover, the specific effects arising from this embodiment tie in with networks of discourse and with associations to local topographic features, cultural practices, literature and so forth.

#### *Part II: Raga name disclosed*

As mentioned above, there was a striking absence in the listeners' responses to Shree of images or emotions referring to authoritative, confident, assertive figures such as kings or

princes, which are extremely common in descriptions of this raga provided by performers. Could these images be somehow related to the meaning of the word 'shree', which had not been disclosed to those who came to our meetings? It was mostly to assess the semantic impact that this name could have on the listeners that I decided to carry out a second set of enquiries: in these sessions, we revealed the name of the raga before the listening started. However, no other information about its common extra-musical attributes was given.

Although this work was carried out with a smaller sample of listeners (twenty-six), the responses do point clearly to such an influence. There was an overall consistency with the previous sessions regarding references to the morning time and descriptions of open spaces and high locations (which were respectively mentioned by approximately 35% and 27% of participants); there was also some mention of a sense of loneliness, melancholy and yearning for something. Most interestingly, though, the data of the two sets of 'listening experiments' diverged quite significantly when it came to the theme of devotion and to depictions of darkness. In fact, among the interviewees to whom the name of Shree had been disclosed, nobody at all mentioned the latter, while the proportion who brought up religious feelings or images evoking worship increased to more than 30% – approximately twice as many as had referred to it when the name of the raga was undisclosed:

A priest is praying by the side of the river Ganga. The sky was red.

(Sunita Dey – Ranigunj, 23 January 2008)

The surrounding is serious and quiet. Perhaps this is the time of prayer. (Purnima Basu – Ranigunj, 23 January 2008)

My mind is flying in the sky. Seems some one is calling me. My god is sited above and I am looking at her face sitting in front of her. It

seems I am discovering myself within her. (Shilpi Chatterjee –  
Ranigunj, 23 January 2008)

I believe both the increased reference to devotion and the absence of images of darkness can be explained by taking into account the word Shree, which in Sanskrit can refer to images of radiant light and splendour, and which in everyday speech in Hindi or Bengali is commonly used as an honorific prefix to address deities and people of high status. Disclosing the name of the raga to the listeners brought these associations to the fore.

### *Summary*

In brief, the study of reception of an excerpt taken from a performance of Shree raga complements previous work carried out with musicians (Leante 2009). The meanings Bengali listeners associated with the music are consistent with those commonly attributed to the Hindustani classical tradition, and some, in particular, with those ascribed to this specific raga by performers. These include portrayals of a sombre, serious, meditative mood, devotional feelings, and references to open spaces and high locations, or to temporary separation (often expressed by the act of reaching out or searching for something). Several of these images can be explained as resulting from the embodiment of a straight upward moving slide distinctive of Shree raga. However, the responses provided by the listeners diverged from those of the performers in a number of respects: for example, in the prominence of the description of sunrise (possibly directly linked to the emphasis on the ascending movement in the melody) and in the absence of evocations of figures of authority such as sovereigns or warriors. In fact, Shree as a 'Lord' seems to be more likely to be associated by listeners with deities rather than kings: I suggest this can be explained if one takes into account the general discourse linking Hindustani classical music to spiritual, religious feelings. At the same time this

aspect acquires particular interest if one considers the constant references in artists' discourse to the courtly environment, seen as a lost ideal and a once-thriving context of patronage for this music tradition. These images seem to have little importance for the collective imagination of listeners. The methodology employed in this study of reception and presented in these pages appears to be an effective research tool to highlight similarities and emphasize divergences between the corpus of knowledge which shapes the 'official' or dominant discourse of North Indian classical genres and the process of signification which characterises the lay listeners' experience of this music.

### **Listening to Jhinjhoti**

In the following pages I will turn to the analysis of listeners' responses to a second case study: an instrumental performance of Jhinjhoti, a raga very different from Shree in terms of both its musical features and the extra musical characteristics generally associated with it. The questions I address here include most of those discussed above; however, in addition to a comparison with the sets of responses to Shree, I will introduce consideration of other elements, in particular instrumental timbre.

Jhinjhoti is usually performed at night and its scale (Figure 8.3) includes the flat seventh degree (Ni); its *vadis* are the third (Ga) and sixth (Dha) degrees. Like Shree it is a well known raga; in contrast, its character is generally believed to be lighter and more romantic, and it does not convey the same meditative, serious mood as Shree. Similarly, its melody is not characterised by a straight linear movement, but rather by a more varied one, with phrases following undulating contours (see Figure 8.5).<sup>22</sup>

[Figure 8.3 here]

The audio excerpt used during fieldwork among Bengali listeners is taken from an alap performed on sitar by Nayan Ghosh, who – during one of our conversations – described Jhinjhoti and explicitly compared it with Shree. (Interestingly, his words point to another process of embodiment in the music – expressed by the image of “a little child’s cheeks” – strikingly different in character from that encountered in the case of Shree’s straight ascending slide):

Jhinjhoti is a ... very sweet rag ... I would personally think of a beautiful starlit night, moonlit night ... [In Shree you get] the vast expanse of the sea or the mountain ranges and the sun setting beyond that and the birds returning, the stillness of the water or the mountains or the air ... Jhinjhoti has a different mood altogether ... [it’s] the tone, the roundness or the sharpness of the tone ... Jhinjhoti is a more loving rag full of affection [and] caringness [*sic*] ... sometimes I try to imagine ... I’m caressing the [slide] between Re and Ga. To help my imagination I can always think of a little child’s cheeks. (Nayan Ghosh – Mumbai, 23 May 2005)

The recording we employed (which lasts proximately 5’44’’) starts with the descending strumming on the sympathetic (*taraf*) strings of the sitar, which – in performance – usually concludes the tuning of the instruments and immediately precedes the actual presentation of the rag.<sup>23</sup> In the following minutes the artist establishes the pitches of the scale and introduces Jhinjhoti’s characteristic phrases, like the distinctive movement Pa-Dha-Sa-Re-Ma-Ga (561243). Figure 8.4 comprises a transcription of the first two minutes<sup>24</sup> of the track, in which the musician moves in the lower octave and establishes the Sa. Figure 8.5 features transcription of the last twenty-three seconds of the excerpt, during which the melodic movement, touching the Re, Ga and Ma, hints at Jhinjhoti’s characteristic phrase.

**Comment [MC1]:** Ed: add subscript dots

**Comment [MC2]:** Ed: Add subscript dots

[Figure 8.4 here]

[Figure 8.5 here]

[INSERT OWM SPEAKER ICON HERE]

The analysis is based on sixty-two responses by sixty-three participants,<sup>25</sup> who again, in the vast majority of cases, did not appear to have recognised the raga. This time too we found a number of common associations of Hindustani classical music, understood as an old tradition offering an emotionally and aesthetically fulfilling experience. This was expressed, for example, through descriptions of nature or even a communion with it. Apart from natural landscapes, some respondents mentioned buildings; on the rare occasions on which buildings featured, they were representative of a notion of historical grandeur. Fewer than 5% of responses made explicit reference to religious or devotional feelings.

[INSERT OWM COMPUTER ICON HERE]

Seems the Music is making my life beautiful. (Malai Choudhury – Purulia, 22 February 2007)

Me and the nature [are] fully mixed together. (Kakali Chatterjee – Ranigunj, 15 February 2007)

I am standing on the terrace of an historically important stony temple, perhaps thousand years old ... the beautiful sculpture of the temple on the wall arrest my attention. I am spell-bound & also absorbed in some deep thoughts. (Saikat Chatterjee – Ranigunj, 15 February 2007)

As in the case of Shree, the description of wide open spaces was common, with approximately a third of participants mentioning this factor.<sup>26</sup>



A lazy afternoon. Sitting in the balcony of 2nd floor, staring towards the vast open space (field) in the front – on a clean sunlit day. The field ends with a river. (Arupbijan De – Purulia, 22 February 2007)

The mood of the music was variously described as romantic, happy, and – more often – melancholic and sorrowful.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, several people mentioned mixed feelings of joy and sadness, which in one case (one of the few trained musicians who participated) were explicitly associated with the flat seventh and the natural sixth degrees of the scale:

Joyousness with an undercurrent of sadness – as in the case of a daughter's wedding. (Sanat and Jaya Ghosh – Kolkata 29 January 2007)

It is a romantic rag where touch of feeling of separation of lovers is also very prominent. Again some times sweet sound of courtship is also present. Though there is apparent difference between these two but both the feelings are present here. (Sabyasachi Sengupta – Ranigunj, 28 January 2008)

The music has taken the shape of a real human being with sorrow and joy. This is a female image. She is expressing her feeling through the Komal nishad [the flat seventh] and Dhaibat [the sixth degree]. (Dilip Kumar Singha – Purulia, 22 February 2007)<sup>28</sup>

References to the time of day the music elicited were also quite varied, ranging from morning to night, with only a slight majority of people referring to the evening. However, what is striking is the fact that – independent of the time indicated by the participants – a lot of the images referred to a particular quality of light: whether that of a spark in the dark, or of a

starry sky or of a summer day, this light was often ‘dazzling, bright’ (Saikat Chatterjee – Ranigunj, 15 February 2007), and/or ‘shimmering’ (anon. – Kolkata, 29 January 2007).

Such descriptions point to specific characteristics: a quick, flickering movement (for example that of a shimmering light) and/or a scattered pattern of light points (as in the case of the starry sky). I suggest that such qualities are crucial to the understanding of the listener’s process of meaning construction for Jhijnhoti. Moreover, I believe this hypothesis is corroborated by other images depicting small shiny objects, such as rain or dew drops, or quick irregular movements, as in the case of birds flapping their wings or insects flying. Such movement can be further represented by sonic analogues such as birds or women chattering:

The honeybees are taking honey from flower to flower, in a garden,  
and wind is blowing gently. A passionate feeling is created in my  
mind. Not me but my mind is flying over the green. Vibration of the  
wings of a peacock. (Shilpi Chanda – Ranigunj, 15 February 2007)

Water dripping in a small pond surrounded by green small shrubs,  
waves forming. Morning sunlight reflecting on wet plant leaves.  
(Subha Mitra –Ranigunj, 23 January 2008)

It is like a dance of a peacock on the day of rain of the rainy season,  
after hot summer day. (Shudeshna Sarkar – Ranigunj, 23 January  
2008)

It seemed that some beautiful wom[e]n are taking bath in a fountain  
and their chattering and the chattering of the birds are mixing with  
the sound of the fountain. (Anupam Bauri – Ranigunj, 23 January  
2008)

Similarly to the previous case study, some of the participants were keen to make reference to Bengali literature; this time, apart from the ever present Tagore, Jibanananda Das was mentioned, and in particular his famous poem ‘Banalata Sen’, which provided, in the words of Chhandam Deb, a sort of *précis* of several pictures elicited by Jhinjhoti:

The evening falls ... I am by the side of a river ...and I recall the day.

I am reminded of ... ‘Banalata Sen’ ... which tells us how the evening

falls at the end of a busy day as silently as a dew-drop; and how the

kit[e] shakes off the smell of sun from its heavy wings; and how in

the evening sky the stars appear. (Chhandam Deb – Purulia, 22

February 2007)

This quote presents open spaces and dusk, as well as bright, twinkling lights. Similarly, Jhinjhoti’s melodic movement (more diverse than the characteristic upward straight slide of Shree) seems to be clearly reflected in the response, which depicts a more varied, non-linear pattern.<sup>29</sup>

However, I would like to focus once more on the bright quality of certain images associated with Jhinjhoti, like the dew-drops or the stars, and on the quick movement of the kite shaking its wings, and suggest that these specific qualities could actually be explained at least in part as resulting from a projection of the sound of the instrument on which the raga is performed. The timbre of the sitar – partly due to the resonance of the sympathetic strings – in fact has that same bright and immediate character which is conveyed by the pictures presented above. The *chikari* strings too contribute to establishing this sense of brightness, by providing a continuous punctuation to the melody with sounds rich in high frequencies. Images evoking twinkling lights could thus be the direct effect of an ‘intersense transfer’ from the auditory to the visual medium. Moreover, in the alap we used for our example these strings are played steadily, but intermittently, in an irregular rhythm: this might contribute to evoking the

scattered, irregular patterns of movement which emerged in the listeners' responses on which I commented in the previous pages.

### *Further discussion*

A number of associations are shared by ragas Jhinjhoti and Shree. This seems to confirm the general perception of Hindustani classical music as conveying profound emotions and feelings and of being associated with nature. However, there are also clear differences, which lead to a number of new research questions and encourage further investigation. For example, one may ask to what extent these differences depend on the patterns of melodic movement of the two ragas, and to what extent on other factors such as the vocal and instrumental timbres. In the case of responses elicited by the excerpt from Shree (even when the name has not been disclosed to the participants) there seems to be more emphasis on images pertaining to the meditative and devotional sphere: is this due to the actual recognition of the intended mood that the singer wants to convey, or it is possible that such mood is ascribed more to vocal than instrumental music by Indian audiences? Other images shared by both the Shree and Jhinjhoti excerpts are those of open spaces: on the one hand these can be explained by a general association of music to nature, to god and to meditation. At the same time, one could argue this is related to the slow pace of the alap which allows the sustained sound of the drone to be in the foreground of the listeners' attention.

The study of the reception of the alap of rag Jhinjhoti by Nayan Ghosh also demonstrated how the process of embodiment of patterns of movements – which appeared to be quite straightforward in the case of the Re-Pa slide in Shree – can actually be more complex: the particular kind of varied movement emerging from the listeners' descriptions could in fact be the projection of Jhinjhoti's melodic characteristics, as well as the sitar's timbre and playing

technique. Similarly, Jhinjhoti's associations with female figures could be explained by the instrument's register.<sup>30</sup> Comparisons with analogous studies of renditions of the same ragas on different instruments and by different singers could shed light on these points.

The analysis presented in these pages has also highlighted how local culture and practices are embedded in listeners' responses. This study was deliberately restricted to fieldwork carried out in West Bengal and therefore reflects meanings attributed to the music by listeners in this region. The extension of this work to other areas on a comparative basis – research currently in progress – will hopefully provide further insights.

## Conclusion

This chapter presents the results of a study of the reception of Hindustani classical music by Indian listeners, the methodology employed in this work and its potential for future research. This method is based on extensive ethnographic enquiries and involves the analysis of spontaneous responses to audio excerpts taken from the alap section of a number of ragas; these responses included descriptions of emotions and imagery evoked by the music.

I have focussed here on two case studies: a vocal performance of Shree raga and a sitar rendition of raga Jhinjhoti. The analysis of the reception of these two ragas shows how this method can help us to investigate common associations attributed by listeners to North Indian classical music in general, as well as the specific associations of different forms of performance (for example vocal or instrumental). This can in turn unveil associations elicited by specific elements such as timbre (which seems to have played a role in the association of Jhinjhoti with images conveying “bright”, “sharp”, “shimmering” qualities). Processes of embodiment of patterns of movement encoded in the music are reflected in the imagery provided by listeners and contribute to shaping the meanings related to a specific raga. In the

case of Shree raga I have discussed how an ascending slide in the melody can be embodied through a gesture which maps onto images associated with the music; as for Jhinjhoti, the imagery seems to be explained not only by a more varied, undulating movement of the melody, but also by timbral qualities of the sitar – in particular those of the *chikari* strings – which elicit more scattered patterns of movement. Furthermore, carrying out separate enquiries on the same raga both concealing and revealing its name allows us to evaluate the impact the name has on reception.

The outcome of this analysis can complement and challenge the understanding of this music expressed by performers, who are exposed to a more articulated and structured knowledge of both the tradition in general and individual ragas in particular. The two cases studies analysed here were sufficient in fact to point to similarities as well as some differences: the study of the reception of Shree, for example, suggests that the ideal of the courtly environment – where this music is understood to have developed and thrived – seem to pertain more to the performers' discourse than to that of the listeners, among whom images relating to the spiritual and devotional sphere appear to be more prominent. In this sense, this research can contribute to building a richer and more comprehensive picture of how Hindustani classical music is received and how both artists and, in particular, listeners (so far mostly ignored in the dominant discourse of performers and scholars) make the experience of this tradition meaningful.

On the whole this work suggests that the construction of meaning in the reception of music is grounded in the co-occurrence of different processes, which can be either mediated by language or dependent on embodiment of sound. This chapter illustrated, for example, how embodied patterns of movement emerging from the melodic characteristic of a raga or from the playing techniques of an instrument are expressed through imagery; this imagery, though, is also informed by common discursive tropes, and by everyday experiences of local

geography, culture and practices. Most importantly, the method and the study I presented here highlighted how linguistically articulated and embodied experiences of music are closely linked and the borders between them blurred: I believe that only the acknowledgement of their co-participation as intrinsic to reception can allow a realistic reflection on processes of signification in music.

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<sup>1</sup> In his classification of different kinds of synaesthesia, Merriam distinguishes ‘intersense transfer’ (which can be culturally mediated and informed by symbolic and aesthetic associations) from the condition ‘which occurs when one is exposed to a stimulation in one sense area but receives and experiences that stimulus in association with another sense area’ (Merriam 1964: 86-87). In this chapter I will focus on the more literary and metaphorical sense of synaesthesia as ‘intersense transfer’.

<sup>2</sup> See also Erich von Hornbostel (1927: 85): ‘[T]here are super-sensuous sense-perceptions. Movement can be seen, heard, or touched.’

<sup>3</sup> An important reference for my previous research is David McNeill’s argument on the co-participation of imagery and gesture in the production of verbal utterances (2005). Work by McNeill as well as by Lakoff and Johnson is contributing significantly to current reflection



among musicologists (see Clayton 2005, Zbikowski 2008 and 2011, Rahaim 2009, and Fatone et al. 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Steve Feld's reflections on speech about music (and music as a "metaphoric process") and his theorization of the listening process as a set of interweaving "interpretive ("locational", "categorical", "associational", "reflective" and "evaluative") moves" are other major references for this research (Feld 1984 and Feld and Fox 1994).

<sup>5</sup> The data analysed in this paper was collected on the following dates and in the following locations: 29 January 2007 and 11 February 2007, Kolkata; 15 February 2007 and 23 January 2008, Raniganj; 18 February 2007, Durgapur; 22 February 2007, Purulia; 28 April 2007, Seuri. I carried out the first eight sessions, at different times, with Tarun Kumar Nayak, Martin Clayton, Mark Doffman and Andrew McGuiness. The sessions on 28 April 2007 and 23 January 2008 were carried out by Tarun Kumar Nayak, to whom I am immensely indebted.

<sup>6</sup> Tarun Kumar Nayak also participated as a professional sarod player in the research discussed by Nikki Moran in Chapter 3 of this volume.

<sup>7</sup> Men and women were represented in the same proportion. The age of participants ranged from 9 years (in only one instance) to four people in their seventies: fifteen participants were in their teens; fifteen in their twenties; twenty-five in their thirties, eighteen in their forties, nine in their fifties; eight in their sixties. A few chose not to disclose their age.

<sup>8</sup> Deva and Virmani (1976) raised some doubts about the appropriateness of Keil and Keil's list of adjectives and employed one which they considered closer to the aesthetics of Hindustani music. They also showed concern about the cultural bias that language might have involved; however, they eventually carried out their experiment exclusively in English.

<sup>9</sup> Educated Bengalis are usually also fluent in either Hindi or English, often both.

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<sup>10</sup> Images and feedback of ambiguous or uncertain interpretation were not considered in the analysis; however, the contribution was still counted within the overall number of responses to that specific audio excerpt.

<sup>11</sup> In the analysis which I present in the following pages, however, the order in which excerpts were played seemed not to affect listeners' responses.

<sup>12</sup> The flat second degree (Re) is indicated with a subscript line, consistently with the Indian notation system (see also Figure 8.1).

<sup>13</sup> The performance was recorded by Martin Clayton in April 2003, in Mumbai, during a pilot study for the EMMP project. Veena Sahasrabuddhe was accompanied by Seema Shirodkar and Vishwanath Shirodkar on harmonium and tabla respectively and by Bageshree Vaze and Madhuchhanda Sanyal on *tanpura*. The excerpt I used during listening sessions discussed in this chapter is a shorter version of that employed by Clayton (2005). As mentioned above, Clayton conducted his enquiries among South Asian and Western listeners: the comments and associations provided by Indian listeners and quoted by Clayton are consistent with those collected among Bengali listeners and presented in this chapter.

The same alap is analysed in its entirety in Leante (2009) in order study how Veena Sahasrabuddhe's gestures in performance relate to the development of the melody and to the images and emotions the artist ascribed to the rag; however, the first 30 seconds of the recording have been edited and removed from the excerpt used during sessions in Bengal (this explains the timing difference between the two analyses).

<sup>14</sup> See Clayton 2005 and Leante 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Two participants – a married couple – preferred to give a joint response. Another three participants took part in two sessions: one recognised the rag and gave responses consistent

with its general extra-musical associations on both occasions; the other two didn't recognise the rag, and only one provided similar feedback in both sessions.

<sup>16</sup> Examples of the association of Hindustani classical music with soothing feelings can be found in the following quotes: 'While listening to this music I felt that I am going to a different world. That is why Classical Music is so beautiful. A heavenly feeling covers my mind'. (Malay Choudhury – Purulia, 22 February 2007); '[T]rue music, i.e., classical, will always lead one to the same plane, i.e., joy, peace and meditation'. (Sambhu Nath Ghosh – Kolkata, 11 February 2007).

<sup>17</sup> More than 37% associated Shree to the time of sunrise.

<sup>18</sup> This is not dissimilar to other cultural contexts: see Tagg 1982.

<sup>19</sup> This was the case for example of Nirmal Kumar Jha, for example, who described a 'mother is feeding her child and is visualizing her/him grow' (Ranigunj, 15 February 2009) and of Arupbijan De while talking about the image of the rising sun (Purulia, 22 February 2007).

<sup>20</sup> One of the participants from Durgapur included in his feedback a suggestion of how the gradual movement from the lower to the middle octave might have elicited for him different images and feelings: 'It was as if I was sitting on a hill top at very late night, or a hour before the day-break ... The long stretch of mountains are gradually becoming visible, the darkness gradually getting faded ... I saw the beautiful light-orange coloured sun unfolding its veil, the speed of unfolding the veil in very close harmony with the speed of music. Then, when the music was at its sweet high level, the full range of snow-peak mountains are clearly visible to me ... At the third stage, when it was again at a bit higher level, it was as inspiring me to get up from my meditation, to go out for work: the pace of music, its strength of sun-shine giving me the energy, some sort of rejuvenation.' (Dr Partha P. Sengupta – Durgapur, 18 February 2007).

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<sup>21</sup> Mentioned respectively by Kakali Chatterjee (Ranigunj, 15 February 2007), Dr Joydeep Banerjee (Durgapur, 18 February 2007), Surela Nandan (Seuri, 18 April 2007).

<sup>22</sup> See also Joep Bor (1999: 88) and Walter Kaufmann (1968: 224-226).

<sup>23</sup> The recording was made on 7 December 2004 by myself, Martin Clayton, Jaime Jones and Nikki Moran in Kolkata. Nayan Ghosh was accompanied on tabla by Abhijeet Banerjee.

<sup>24</sup> In the transcription I decided to include the occurrences of striking on the *chikari* strings, which provide an intermittent punctuation to the melody, and which are here represented by the C octaves printed as small note heads. Although this is not consistent with common transcription practice in South Asian music scholarship, which usually focuses on the main melody notes, my goal here is to try to represent the actual sounds of the sitar that listeners heard.

<sup>25</sup> Two participants (the same as in the case of *Shree*) decided to give a joint response.

<sup>26</sup> About 3% depicted a high location, a lower proportion than in the case of *Shree* (almost 8%).

<sup>27</sup> Mention of joy, sorrow or a mix of the two occurred in almost 30% of the responses of which more than a third made exclusive reference to sorrow or melancholy.

<sup>28</sup> Dilip Kumar Singha identified himself as a vocalist.

<sup>29</sup> During our conversations, I could not identify in the participants' behaviour any distinctive hand gesture comparable to the upward arm movement associated to *Shree*.

<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, references to the female gender were not as prominent in the vocal excerpt of *Shree* performed by Veena Sahasrabuddhe.